

*The Seventh
Lord Hastings
Memorial Lecture*

1972



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DELIVERED BY
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Agriculture in the Economy of the 1980's

I find it difficult to avoid the thought that the Norfolk Agricultural Station behaved somewhat eccentrically when it decided to grant me the honour of delivering a memorial lecture which was established to pay tribute to a man who was an outstanding personality in the world of Norfolk farming. My predecessors in this series of addresses have all been prominent members of your profession. I, on the other hand, have never been more than a "paper farmer", and my only qualifications for being here are that I am devoted to the countryside, and that I have for long had an interest in the question of the place of farming in the British economy.

What makes the occasion even stranger for me is that I now come before you as a kind of resurrected amateur of farming. It is more than ten years since I served as one of the scientific members of the Agricultural Research Council, and almost as long since, as Chairman of a Government Committee which has now disappeared, I was deeply immersed in some aspects of agricultural practice and policy. Even worse—it is quite fifteen years since I had the temerity to address an audience of agriculturists. That was early in 1958, when I spoke to the twelfth Oxford Farming Conference on the subject of "The National Need for Increased Self-Sufficiency". At the time, I thought I knew something about the problems which were then bedevilling agriculture; if I did not, it was certainly not for want of trying. But fifteen years is a long time, and I have forgotten much of what I then knew.

Today, however, I have undertaken to peer into a crystal ball in order to discern the state of agriculture some fifteen years hence. I suppose I can take comfort in the fact that crystal balls are more for amateurs than for professionals, and that when it comes to speculation, an audience of agriculturists might just as well listen to someone who views their activities from the sidelines as to one of their own number.

But I have to start by asking whether, in the time-scale of agriculture, the 80's are all that far away. The units of time in the farming calendar are the natural periods of the growth cycles of crops and livestock. However essential the annual price review, its seasonal occurrence is not necessarily indicative of the pace of technical change in agriculture. Patterns of production change relatively slowly. Who was it who first pointed out that modern man has added few, if any, new crops or new species of livestock to those he inherited from his neolithic forbears?

But even if the pattern of agriculture changes slowly, it is nonetheless always subject to enormous pressures, first because of increasing and changing demand, second because of scientific and technological progress, and third because of the social and political changes which take place at an ever accelerating pace in the world at large. The world is hungry for food, and there are those who even assert—I am not of their number—that with present rates of population growth, we shall never rid ourselves of the problems of malnutrition and starvation. Yet if the world needs food, how is it, one might ask, that practically all countries have an agricultural problem, which in some is so acute as always to be the central issue of politics? Some countries produce too much of one or other commodity; others too little. Some, for arbitrary political reasons, subsidise agricultural production; others do so out of dire necessity. There are inevitably clashes of interest in the commodity markets of the world—I am not going to weary you with talk of the advantages France has gained from the E.E.C.'s Common Agricultural Policy, or about New Zealand lamb, or about Danish ham, or fish from the seas around Iceland. I am merely referring at the outset to this general problem in order to make the point that, with the world divided as it is, it is inevitable that agriculture, in addition to being a calling, a way of life, and a social necessity, is necessarily also a political issue.

I consulted the paper on self-sufficiency which I delivered fifteen years ago to see if it could act as some kind of "marker" to help me steer my way into the 80's. To my surprise, I found that the matters to which I then addressed myself are still very much alive. I began that address by pointing to the

problems of improving farming efficiency, competitiveness, and profitability in order to reduce the level of subsidies (which at that time were running at about £300 million, a figure more or less numerically the same as now, but in real terms nearly twice as much as the present level of agricultural support). I then referred to the balance of payments, a problem which is always with us, and so far as one can see, always will be. We produce practically no raw materials for export—whether of food, timber or minerals. Can we always rely on the competitiveness of our manufacturing industries to provide us with the resources to buy from abroad the food and other raw materials which we cannot produce ourselves, but which we must have? Can we rely on our foreign sources of food supply? Up to what point does it pay the country to support its agriculture rather than divert to manufacturing industry the resources which the support of farming consumes? By how much would the price of different foods rise in overseas markets if we did not produce ourselves?

These are all familiar questions. But they are as relevant today as they were in the immediate post-war period. I find myself believing that they will be as relevant fifteen years hence as they are now. There were other arguments in favour of agriculture which I adduced in that address of fifteen years ago—its value to the amenity of the countryside, its beneficial impact on conservation, as well as the need to assure stability of investment in land and farming.

I then turned to the essential problem of the measures which might increase a farmer's net output in relation to gross output—which from the national point of view meant using good agricultural practice based on sound science and technology in order to find the right economic ways of reducing the volume and cost of the imported commodities which are used in agriculture—fertilizers, store cattle, feeding-stuffs, seed, oil, machinery. At the time I spoke, the main and most important item on my list on which it was sensible to focus was feeding-stuffs.

There was, I pointed out, no technical or scientific problem in substituting for imported feeds—the issue was essentially economic and social. The more efficient and better favoured farmer would have no difficulty in bringing about the switch—the problem was essentially that of the then 130,000 holdings between 20 and 100 acres, and the large number that were even smaller, which between them were responsible for 40 to 50 per cent of the national dairy herd. These small holdings depended on imported concentrates. But something like 100,000 small farmers were in fact not earning an

income which even approached an agricultural worker's wage. I did not receive an entirely good press when I then pointed out that the farming community was trying to make itself efficient at the same time as it was looking after what was, regarded objectively, a major social problem.

There is no need for me to say any more about that address of fifteen years ago. But before I launch myself into the future, let us see what has happened in the interval. First, even when one allows for the modifications that have been introduced in the form of agricultural statistics, there has been a considerable decline in the number of individual holdings in the UK—nearly 100,000 of the 500,000 which existed fifteen years ago have since disappeared—and there has also been a 1.7 per cent decline in the total area of agricultural land. Next, the total arable acreage has increased by a small amount and tillage has increased by about 8.5 per cent. At the same time, the number of cattle and calves has increased by 24 per cent, poultry has increased by about 50 per cent, and pigs by more than 40 per cent. Sheep have increased by about 8 per cent. There have also been significant increases in the yields of all tillage crops as well as of milk and eggs. The total supply of concentrated feeding stuffs has increased by about 35 per cent but—and this is significant—the proportion which was imported has declined by about 15 per cent.

These are striking changes, and in terms of the resources employed, they obviously denote a considerable improvement in agricultural efficiency. This is more than evident from the figures published in the Government's last annual review paper—the last which would be published, as the paper pointed out, before our Treaty of Accession to the E.E.C. came into effect. Apart from the decline in the number of farm holdings, the number of agricultural workers has fallen by well over a third. At the same time, the index for labour productivity, which of course takes into account factors other than the number of workers employed, has all but doubled since the late 50's. The average annual rate of increase in labour productivity has recently been running at about 6 per cent, and the outflow of regular whole-time workers at about 3 per cent.

All this represents a vast transformation of the agricultural scene—and now that I see what has happened, I do not suppose that when I spoke at the Oxford Conference in 1958 I could possibly have conceived of so much progress towards what then looked to me, and to others from whom I was learning, as an unavoidable consequence of the forces then operating in the farming world. From the point of view of self-sufficiency, the present situation definitely looks better, and I suppose that from the point of view

of the social problems of agriculture, the changes that have occurred in the structure of the industry also represent progress, however painful progress may have been to some of the individuals concerned.

But can these trends continue in the light of the growing demand for agricultural products, and how far can they go? These are the questions to which the crystal ball must now give answers.

We start from the fact that the United Kingdom is now more urbanized than any great nation has ever been in human history. Only some 3 per cent of those employed in the civil field are still engaged in agriculture. On the other hand, and following the rapid growth of agricultural productivity over the past two to three decades, the 3 per cent is also responsible for about 3 per cent of the gross domestic product. Home agriculture and fisheries now provide us with about 53 per cent of the food we consume. Of the remainder, about 27 per cent is accounted for by imports of types of food which are also produced at home, while the remaining 20 per cent of our supplies are non-indigenous foodstuffs which cannot be produced here—at any rate as yet. We therefore today provide just over half our food; and we produce a little more than two-thirds of the foods which could be produced in this country.

At first sight, these percentages seem much as they have always been since the end of the Second World War. But we have to remember that the intervening years have seen a considerable growth in demand, partly because of our increased population—there are now 6 or 7 million more mouths to feed—and partly because of the very striking rise in the average standard of living. It is to the credit of British agriculture that over the past two decades the increased domestic demand for food has been met from increased domestic production, and that our food imports have in consequence not increased over the period. Again, one asks, can this trend continue?

It is not too risky to make estimates of the probable demand for food up to 1985. First, we need to estimate the size and demographic structure of the population; we can turn to the Registrar-General for that information. Next, we have to assess the probable trends in consumption for each broad group of foods, subject to general constraints about the energy value and nutrient content of the totals. Given the finite capacity of the human stomach, and the dietary conservatism of any particular socio-economic group, levels of food consumption are reasonably foreseeable. For the nation as a whole, trends in average consumption levels consist largely in moves “up the scale” towards the behaviour patterns and levels of the prevailing more favoured groups.